

Orthodoxy in America

*From a talk, delivered at the Saint Herman Winter Pilgrimage on December 12/25, 1979, at the Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, N.Y. by **Hieromonk Seraphim (Rose)** of blessed memory.*

We have gathered here today to venerate St. Herman, first saint of the American land, first Orthodox missionary to America, bringer of Orthodox Christianity to the New World. This feast gives us an opportunity to look at the Orthodoxy he brought: what has happened to it since his time, where it stands in this country today, what are the hopes for it -- and for us, who are today's Orthodox Christians -- in the years ahead, nearly two hundred years after the seeds of the true faith were planted here.

The Past of Orthodoxy in America

I will say only a few words about the past of Orthodoxy in America, in order to concentrate chiefly on what faces us today.

First of all, of course, there was the mission of St. Herman himself, with the seven other missionaries who came with him from Valaam and Konevits Monasteries in the north of Russia in 1794. It is really astonishing what an Orthodox foundation these missionaries laid in Alaska, considering how few they were and what obstacles they faced. One of these eight, Fr. Ioasaph, was consecrated bishop in order to increase the work in America, but he was lost at sea on the return voyage before he could even begin his work. There were few priests in the early years, St. Herman himself wasn't a priest, and the Russian officials in Alaska were not very cooperative -- but in those years thousands of natives were baptized, and their descendants remain Orthodox today; and with St. Herman's labors as a monk, preacher, and carer of orphans, America saw for the first time a living example of the traditional Orthodox piety and spiritual life which made Holy Russia. This is something very important for our Orthodoxy today -- this example of true Orthodox Christianity in practice.

The next great Orthodox missionary in America was the holy hierarch Innocent of Alaska, who first as priest and then as bishop gave a classic example of Orthodox missionary activity, translating the Gospel into the local languages, caring for the bodies as well as the souls of the flock of his vast missionary territory. In his last years, when he became Metropolitan of Moscow, he supported missionary labors in other places also.

With the sale of Alaska to the American government in 1867, the mission territory changed somewhat: the Russian government continued to send support to Alaska, but the seat of the Diocese now became San Francisco, and for the first time an English-language mission was undertaken. The outstanding missionary at the beginning of this century in San Francisco was Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich, a Serb by birth who died in Yugoslavia in 1940, whose books on Orthodox faith and practice in English are still in print. Bishop Tikhon (the future Patriarch of Moscow) also greatly encouraged the English-language mission, and under him and the other Russian bishops there were missions also for other national groups -- Syrians, Serbs, etc.

However, even at this time the beginnings of weaknesses could be noted. America is a vast land; the Russians and other Orthodox settlers were widely scattered; priests were thinly spread; and perhaps most important of all, there were no other-worldly saints like St. Herman to plant the seeds of holiness deep in the American soil. Further, the English-speaking American people were not simple like the natives of Alaska, and they already practiced some form of Christian faith.

For all of these reasons we can see the beginning, even before the Russian Revolution, of the terrible disease we see in the Orthodox jurisdictions in America today; the disease of worldliness. Outwardly, the Orthodox clergy began to look like the non-Orthodox clergy around them; inwardly, the concern was mainly to provide priests for the widely-scattered ethnic flock, without deepening their Orthodoxy by providing English texts of the classic Orthodox books or reaching out to tell the non-Orthodox who might listen that there is a true Christianity that is undreamed of in the West, the fullness of Holy Orthodoxy.

What Is Orthodoxy?

We can define Orthodoxy in no better way than in the words of the great 18th-century Russian Father, St. Tikhon of Zadonsk -- a Saint whose fervent spirit is needed very much today by Orthodox Christians. We should read him more and practice what he teaches. St. Tikhon calls Orthodoxy "the true Christianity," and he wrote a whole book under this title. But "true Christianity" does not mean just having the right opinions about Christianity -- this is not enough to save one's soul.

St. Tikhon in his book, in the chapter on "The Gospel and Faith," says: "If someone should say that true faith is the correct holding and confession of correct dogmas, he would be telling the truth, for a believer absolutely needs the Orthodox holding and confession of dogmas. But this knowledge and confession by itself does not make a man a faithful and true Christian. The keeping and confession of Orthodox dogmas is always to be found in true faith in Christ, but the true faith of Christ is not always to be found in the confession of Orthodoxy... The knowledge of correct dogmas is in the mind, and it is often fruitless, arrogant, and proud... The true faith in Christ is in the heart, and it is fruitful, humble, patient, loving, merciful, compassionate, hungering and thirsting for righteousness; it withdraws from worldly lusts and clings to God alone, strives and seeks always for what is heavenly and eternal, struggles against every sin, and constantly seeks and begs help from God for this." And he then quotes Blessed Augustine, who teaches: "The faith of a Christian is with love; faith without love is that of the devil" ("True Christianity," ch. 287, p. 469). St. James in his Epistle tells us that "the demons also believe and tremble" (James 3:19).

St. Tikhon, therefore, gives us a start in understanding what Orthodoxy is: it is something first of all of the **heart**, not just the mind, something **living** and **warm**, not abstract and cold, something that is learned and practiced in **life**, not just in school.

A person who takes Orthodoxy seriously and begins to really work on understanding it with his heart and changing himself -- has at least a little of a quality we might call the fragrance of true Christianity; he is different from people who live by nothing higher than the world. St. Macarius the Great, the 4th-century Egyptian desert father, teaches in his Homilies that "Christians have their own world, their own way of life, their own understanding and word and activity; far different from theirs are the way of life and understanding and word and activity of the people of this world. Christians are one thing, and lovers of the world quite another. Inasmuch as the mind and understanding of Christians is constantly occupied with reflection on the heavenly, they behold eternal good things by communion and participation in the Holy Spirit... Christians have a different world ... a different way of thinking from all other men" (Homily V, 1:20). Later I'll try to say a word on how Orthodox Christians should be absorbing this different world and way of thinking. Orthodoxy, the true Christianity, is not just another set of beliefs; it is a whole way of life that makes us different people, and it is directly bound up with how much heavenly and eternal things are present in our life.

An Orthodox person who is **not** different can be worse off than the non-Orthodox. There is nothing sadder than the spectacle of Orthodox Christians, who possess a treasure that cannot be valued by any earthly measure, something which many are seeking and do not find in today's world -- nothing is sadder than Orthodox Christians who do not value and do not use this treasure.

I'd like to tell you a little about a group of Protestants who live not too far from our monastery in northern California. In some ways I think they are actually an example for us, in other ways a warning, and perhaps most of all an indication of the responsibility and opportunity we Orthodox Christians have because we have been given the **true Christianity**.

These Protestants have a simple and warm Christian faith without much of the sectarian narrowness that characterizes many Protestant groups. They don't believe, like some Protestants, that they are "saved" and don't need to do any more; they believe in the idea of spiritual struggle and training the soul. They force themselves to forgive each other and not to hold grudges. They take in bums and hippies off the streets and have a special farm for rehabilitating them and teaching them a sense of responsibility. In other words, they take Christianity seriously as the most important thing in life; it's not the fullness of Christianity that we Orthodox have, but it's good as far as it goes, and these people are warm, loving people who obviously love Christ. In this way they are an example of what we should be, only more so. Whether they attain salvation by their practice of Christianity is for God to judge, for some of their views and actions are far from the true Christianity of Orthodoxy handed down to us from Christ and His Apostles; but at least an awareness of their existence should help us to be aware of what we already have. Some of our Orthodox young people -- for whatever reason, they don't realize what treasure their Orthodox faith contains -- are joining such Protestant groups; and some of our uninformed young people go much farther from Orthodoxy -- one of the 900 victims of Jonestown a year ago was a Greek Orthodox girl, the daughter of an Orthodox priest.

I'm telling you about these Protestants both as a warning of how Orthodox young people can lose the treasure they already have if they haven't been made aware enough of it, and more importantly, as a means of defining a little better the true Christianity we have and these Protestants don't have. Some of our Orthodox young people are converted to groups like this, but it works the other way around also -- some of these Protestants are being converted to Orthodoxy. And why not? If we have the true Christianity, there should be something in our midst that someone who sincerely loves the truth will see and want. We've baptized several people from this Protestant group in our monastery; they are drawn to Orthodoxy by the grace and the sacraments whose presence they feel in Orthodoxy, but which are absent in their group. And once they become Orthodox, they find their Protestant experience, which seemed so real to them at the time, to be quite shallow and superficial. Their leaders give very practical teachings based on the Gospel, but after a while the teachings are exhausted and they repeat themselves. Coming to Orthodoxy, these converts find a wealth of teaching that is inexhaustible and leads them into a depth of Christian experience that is totally beyond even the best of non-Orthodox Christians. We who are already Orthodox have this treasure and this depth right in front of us, and we must use it more fully than we usually do; it is a matter of spiritual life and death both for ourselves and for those around us who can be awakened to the truth of Orthodoxy.

Just this last week I crossed the whole of America by train -- a vast land, with many different kinds of landscapes and settlements. And I thought of St. Seraphim's vision of the vast Russian land, with the smoke of the prayers of believers going up like incense to God. Perhaps someone will say to me: "Oh, you talk like a convert! America is America. It's full of Protestants and unbelievers, and the Orthodox will always be a little minority of people who stick to themselves and have no influence on the rest of America." Well, I'm not saying that we Orthodox will "convert America" -- that's a little too ambitious for us. However, St. Herman himself did have

such a dream. He wrote a letter after participating in the first "missionary conference" on American soil, when that small band of missionaries divided up the vast land of Alaska and argued over who would get the most land to cover. St. Herman, hearing this, says that he was so exalted in soul that he thought he was present when the Apostles themselves were dividing up the world for the preaching of the Gospel.

We don't have to have such exalted ideas in order to see that the prayers of believers could be going up to God in America. What if we who are Orthodox Christians began to realize who we are? -- to take our Christianity seriously, to **live** as though we actually were in contact with the true Christianity? We would begin to be different, others around us would begin to be interested in why we are different, and we would begin to realize that we have the answers to their spiritual questions.

On this same train trip across the country I had what could be called missionary encounters. Of course, I wasn't passing out tracts in the aisles; but just sitting there in my ~rassa~ with a cross and my beard, I attracted attention. Some of it wasn't fruitful, but was typical of how we Orthodox are often regarded in America: one small boy thought I was "Santa Claus," and a woman pointed me out as "Ayatollah!" I also had several encounters with people who **should** have been Orthodox: one woman who was married to a Greek man; a man who was married to a Greek woman, but neither of them Orthodox because the woman's grandmother had become a Lutheran for social reasons -- here it was obvious how worldliness had taken its toll of yet another Orthodox family in America.

But there were some fruitful encounters, too. To several people I was able to speak about Orthodoxy (which they had never heard of) and hand out some copies of "The Orthodox Word". One of these people had a story that should move our Orthodox hearts.

For most of the day that I was crossing vast Wyoming -- full of nothing but frozen, barren land and a few antelope herds -- I was talking to an intense young man who was searching for the truth after finding out that the "charismatic" movement is not from God. After becoming disillusioned with American religion -- the Methodists, Roman Catholics, Baptists, and various Protestant evangelists -- as a last resort he is learning Russian in order to go to Russia and find out what he'll be told by people who are suffering for their faith. "Maybe that will be real," he said, as opposed to the religious hypocrisy he sees everywhere. He asked me eagerly about many things, from doctrines to customs to moral teachings, and then read the chapter on the charismatic movement in our book, "Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future" -- which he said put into words what he felt (based on his own experience) but didn't have the teaching to express. Here is where Orthodoxy, the true Christianity, can literally save someone who otherwise might fall into despair from the inadequacy of the Christianity of the West. Here again a seed was sown; perhaps Wyoming won't become Orthodox, but a few souls there might.

All this is by way of explaining that Orthodoxy, in St. Tikhon's definition, is the **true Christianity**, and it was never more needed than today. We must realize what a treasure we have, and make it active in us. This need not mean going door to door like Jehovah's Witnesses, or preaching in the streets. The outward expression of our faith will come naturally once we have begun to go inward, finding out what this treasure is and letting ourselves be truly changed by it.

Recently an Orthodox person of some sensitivity and depth told me: "Orthodoxy is the truth, but it's too difficult for men today, so I seldom speak of it." There is a kernel of truth in this statement. Orthodoxy IS difficult compared to the Western denominations; but still -- anyone who is capable of wanting a demanding faith is capable of accepting Orthodoxy. We have to sow more, so there will be more to reap. But first of all we have to go inward and make the true Christianity of Orthodoxy a **living part of ourselves**.

Orthodoxy -- Here and Now

We are in a privileged position of peace and freedom, and this is dangerous for us. We can sit in the midst of our Orthodox treasures, the treasures that give salvation that no one else has -- and be satisfied with our situation and so be totally fruitless. If we have difficulty in being Orthodox -- then let us rejoice, for that means we must struggle, and there is hope that we won't wither and die spiritually. Often we have the wrong idea about our situation. We think: "If only I could go somewhere else, change my situation, and the like, my problems would be solved"; but usually this is not right at all. We must start right now, wherever we are. If it is difficult, that is all the better -- it means we have to fight for our Christianity; and if you have to fight and struggle, you become more aware.

But there are also opportunities in our privileged position, and we should use them. Every Christian has a talent from God, and He will ask what we have done with what He gave us. In Soviet Russia and other Communist countries, there is the talent of suffering for Christ and being faithful in the midst of trials. In the free world, the talent given most of us is the talent of **freedom**: we have been given the freedom to practice our faith and the opportunity through our abundance of Orthodox texts to become fully aware of it and deepen it within ourselves. But this Orthodoxy must be the **true Christianity** that St. Tikhon describes -- the Orthodoxy not of the mind but of the heart. This kind of Orthodoxy cannot be acquired overnight; it requires suffering, experience, testing. But first of all it requires **resolve**. If each one of us puts this resolve in his heart, if we take our Christian Faith seriously and resolve to be faithful to it, there can be a literal resurrection of true Christianity in our midst.

Let me end with the words of St. Herman, whose feast we are celebrating -- he also was one of those concerned ones who made full use of the opportunities given them. In the famous incident when he asked the officers of a ship what they loved most of all, and then put them to shame by telling them that only God is worth loving so much, he ended his instruction with these words, which you will find on some icons of St. Herman: **"From this day, from this hour, from this minute, let us love God above all."** A very simple thing -- which is exactly what we all must do. May God give us the strength for it, by the prayers of His great Saint, Herman of Alaska.

Amen.